Study of Neutrality Factors of Afghanistan in World War I (1914-1919)

1Sadaat Sayed Habibullah, 2Razasaed Masooma and 3Popalzai Mohammad Ihsan

1Teaching Assistant, Department of History, Education Faculty, Nangarhar University.  
2Assistant Professor, Department of History, Education Faculty, Nangarhar University.  
3Teaching Assistant, Department of History, Education Faculty, Laghman University.

ABSTRACT

The World War I, which is known as a Great War until the outbreak of World War II, is the first large-scale and pervasive war in history involving various countries from different continents. For the first time in the history, all five members of European Concert and 35 other countries participated in the war. The war began between the Allied and Central Powers in Europe, and with the entrance of the Ottoman Empire in favor of the allies, it expanded to more parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Britain, France, and Russia were on the Allied front, and the central powers such as Germany, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire were on the opposite side. Since Russia and Britain were side by side on a single front against the central powers, they sensed the need to reach an agreement on their sphere of influence in Central and South Asia, and thus achieve two main goals. On the one hand, they had to relieve themselves of colonial rivalries and confrontations over division of the colonies; and on the other hand, they had to create obstacles against the influence of the Central powers in this region, by handling the foreign policy of these areas and keep this region calm and neutral. Given to this situation, Afghanistan under Amir Habibullah Khan’s reign had no choice but to follow Abdul Rahman's foreign and domestic policy. Abdul Rahman Khan’s policy was to remain silent and incapable against excessive British influence in country’s affairs, and to adopt neutrality and non-interference policy in foreign relations without British advice and permission. The point to be noted here is the public and the national religious stratum of Afghanistan supported the Central Powers and they were opposite to the allied. There might be two possible reasons for this; first, the emergence of Ottomans in the First world war as a part of the Central Powers, which was led by the Islamic Caliph, initiate a kind of popular religious allegiance among the masses in Islamic countries, who considered the Central Powers as supporters and defenders of Islam, and the allies as the enemies of Islam. The second reason lay down in traditional hostility of Afghans to the British. Because Afghanistan had fought the British several times, and these wars and British colonial policies had created hatred and disgust among the citizens of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Factors, Neutrality, World War, Foreign Policy, The politics of isolationism.

1. Preface

World War I began on July 28, 1914 and ended on November 11, 1918. Most countries in the world were directly and indirectly involved in this war, but a number of countries remained neutral, such as Afghanistan. The poles of World War I were Germany and Austria, which faced Britain and Russia, and each of these countries had dozens of other countries by their sides. Ottoman Turkey sided with Germany, and Britain had the support of Indian subcontinent with it. Afghanistan was ruled by Habibullah Khan, son of Abdul Rahman Khan, when the war started.

Germany and Britain began efforts to join Afghanistan in their favor, in very short period after the war started. A delegation of Germans and Turks, followed by representatives of the displeased revolutionaries and Muslims of India, arrived Afghanistan on August 14, 1915, to persuade the Emir to join in favor of Germany in the war. The Turkish delegation included Kazem Big, the
representative of Ottoman Caliph, Sultan Muhammad V, and the German delegation comprised Oscar von Niedermeyer and Otften Huntig, representatives of German Emperor Wilhelm II. A number of Indian revolutionaries led by Raja Mohendera Pratabh and Rumi Barakatullah joined the Turkish and German delegations, later.

At the same time, the representatives of British Indian began traveling to Kabul to prevent Amir from joining Germany, or at least persuade him to join Britain. Talks between the warring factions and Habibaullah Khan lasted for months in Kabul, and it led to two and several factions between the Amir's courts. A number of nationalist courtiers, such as the Tarzi family, persuaded the Amir to enter to war with Britain in favor of Ottoman Caliphate and Germans. They had enormous influence in Afghan court and tribes, and in addition owned the Siraj al-Akhbar publication as well. Moreover, the traditional classes of Afghan society were sided with them. While on the other hand, there were Amir and other government officials who did not want to enter to war with the British. The Amir's group did not see the ability to fight British on the one hand, and they did not want British aid to be cut off to the court on the other hand. Finally, Amir Habibullah Khan convened a meeting (Jirga) with 540 government dignitaries in October 1915 to discuss whether or not to join the warring parties. The meeting, which had the status of a traditional Loya Jirga, voted for Afghanistan's neutrality after long discussions.

The decision disappointed the German and Turkish delegations, and made Britain happy. The King of England thanked Habibullah Khan for Afghanistan's neutrality in the war. In addition, The King of England pledged to donate Rs 2.4 million annually to Afghanistan. Besides this the king aided Rs. 60 million to Afghan Amir’s court.

Thus, Afghanistan became one of the few neutral countries and run-away the devastating consequences of World War I. The neutrality of Afghanistan in World War I was one of the key factors in the victory of Britain and Allies over Germany and central powers. According to the author, if the Afghan front and tribal areas revolted against Britain, Britain would have to recall its troops from Iraq to India back; and in addition, other Britain would have to call for more troops from Europe to fight the tribes, and this could have had a decisive effect on the war. When Afghanistan declared its neutrality, Britain breathed a sigh of relief and strengthened its European and Middle Eastern fronts, which eventually led to Germany's defeat. In a brief review of this research, Afghanistan's neutrality factors in World War I are divided into internal and external factors, we will study each of these factors briefly. Finally, we will answer this question that what factors have played decisive role in this neutrality?

2. Importance of the Study

As it is clear that no research has been done regarding to this subject in Nangarhar University so far, it will be a new subject to the interested ones. The topics of the article will have special importance for students and interested once, so that they can gain enough information about case..

3. Objectives of the Research:

The research entitled, Study of Neutrality Factors of Afghanistan in World War I (1919-1914) has the following objectives:

- This article is valuable and beneficial for professionals, fans and students of the history department.
- The research encourages authors to do more study in this field.
- To meet a requirement of academic promotion (essay writing).

4. Research Questions

This research seeks to answer following questions:

1- What are the internal factors of Afghanistan's neutrality in World War I?
2- What are the external factors of Afghanistan's neutrality in World War I?

5. Research Methodology

This research which is conducted in the Sayed Jamaluddin Education University studies the effect of Group Work on Students. It is This scientific and academic research has been carried out using librarian method. First of all, we have gathered new and valid information from academic and scientific books, and valuable webpages. Later, we have divided under the titles and paragraphs systematically. Article is written very simple and readers can understand it easily.

6. Literature Review

Every researcher has to study a number of scientific books and academic articles to complete his/her research. For completing and conducting this research we have studied the following books.
Mohammad Siddiq Farhang (1955), in his book, Afghanistan in the Last Five Centuries, has discussed about Amir Habibullah Khan and the politics of Afghanistan during the First World War, and historical developments in Afghanistan.

W. Adamak Ludwig (1970), History of Afghanistan's political relations from Amir Abdul Rahman to independence; He deals with important political and social events in Afghanistan.

Hassan Abik Zafar (2003), he examines the Russian-British rivalry in Afghanistan in his book; Afghanistan from the Reign of Amir Habibullah Khan to the Presidency of Sardar Mohammad Hashim Khan:

Sayed Mohammad Bagher Mesbahzadeh (2008); He recapped the formation of political circles of Amir Habibullah, and the First World War and the positioning of Afghanistan in the First World War.

7. Internal Factors

After the death of Abdul Rahman Khan, his son Amir Habibullah Khan ascended the throne without bloodshed. Habibullah inherited a country with specific geographical borders and a regular and strong army. Although the new king initially undertook a series of apparent reforms and announced some freedoms, but in foreign policy he did not have enough independence like his father. In fact, the reign was surrendered to Habibullah Khan with the indicators (characteristics) of his father's period, and according to the previous agreements that the British had signed with Abdul-Rahman and, which was later renewed in 1905, Habibullah was faced with a taken action. He inevitably accepted all conditions of the British and was disqualified and deprived of independence in the field of foreign policy, in order to maintain his power and domination. In addition, the unfavorable internal situations and the anti-British atmosphere was making the fire of war to be flare up more and more, and Amir always felt threatened in this regard, and he did not want to endanger the stability of the country and his rule due to the war and the suppression of insurgents and dissidents. Consequently, Habibullah Khan pursued the policy of neutrality and refrained from engaging in regional and global controversies. (Mesbahzadeh , 2008)

7.1 Lack of Independent Foreign Policy

As Habibullah Khan had inherited the scheme of governing and managing domestic and foreign policy from his father, and the treaties signed with the super powers in the region to keep Afghanistan neutral; created the factors and conditions for the absence of a defined foreign policy for Afghanistan. So, having a foreign policy was not only meaningless but also impossible in the time of Habibullah Khan. An example of this can be found at the beginning of World War I. When the representatives of Ottoman Empire and Germany entered Afghanistan to persuade Habibullah in their favor. However, it was later seen that British infiltrators prevented the Shah from approaching them. On the other hand, Shah's interests in Britain's neighborhood were defined in a way that he could not joined the opposition of Britain. The Shah signed the (Khal) Treaty in 1905, and according to this treaty he accepted all of Abdul Rahman's commitments to Britain and he left no way to change the course of Afghanistan's political independence. (Tranzio, 1984)

7.2 Economic and Military Weakness

Afghanistan had major military power under the reign of Abdul Rahman. The country had a well-organized army and sufficient military experience, because the country had done well in the war against insurgents and internal opposition throughout the reign of Abdul-Rahman. But when Habibullah came to power, he created a series of reforms and turned the atmosphere of war, repression and bloodshed into an atmosphere of calm and stability in the country. Moreover, he reduced heavy taxes, allowed dissidents and exiles to return home; and introduced religious, social, and ceremonial reforms at various levels. It worth noting that under Habibullah Khan's reign Afghanistan was no longer powerful militarily as it used to be under Abdul Rahman’s reign, and the country has not grown much economically. Trade and exchange of commercial goods was very limited, and it was controlled by the British. In addition, this control had very little effect on the prosperity of the country's general economy. Accordingly, economic and military weakness and vulnerability to British influence prevented Afghanistan from having an independent foreign policy and entering in war against the Allies. (Ludwig, 1970).

7.3 Amir's Personal Unwillingness to Get Involved in the War, and Following the Policy of Isolationism

As mentioned earlier, Habibullah Khan was forced to sign the Treaty of Khal in 1905, and on the other hand he owed his accession to the throne to the British. So, deviating from the provisions of the 1905 agreement would never end in the favor of Amir, and Amir did not want the status quo to change. Furthermore, Habibullah dealt with the opponents of the tribes and religious forces who were in favor of declaring jihad against Britain, on several occasions. The cold reception of the Ottoman and German representatives in Kabul also showed the same inner tendencies of Amir Habibullah. Consequently, Habibullah followed his father's policy of isolationism and refused to enter the world war. (Ghobar, 2004)
8. External Factors

The role of external factors in Afghanistan's neutrality in World War I is more than internal factors, and controlling Afghanistan's foreign policy by Britain was the main reason for this role. With its political and military dependence on British at that time, Afghanistan was never able to make foreign policy decisions. Although, Amir was inclined to the Turks once and wanted to show his political independence, but nothing was done by Amir in practice and reality. In addition, being located in the neighborhood of two major Allied powers, Russia and Britain, prevented Afghanistan from entering the war in favor of the central powers. On the other hand, the interests of the two allied powers, Russia and Britain, did not entice Afghanistan to enter the war in favor of the Allies. Because, then there would be the possibility of losing Afghanistan and the consequently arising territorial disputes between Russia and Britain. Below we mention one of the major external factors that played sufficient role in this neutrality. (Farhang, 1957).

8.1 Agreement between Britain and Russia in the Treaty of St. Petersburg (1907)

The 1907th Treaty was one of the main factors in Afghanistan's neutrality in World War I. In fact, the agreement was an attempt to prevent a clash between the two powers, and the agreement had to be approved by Afghanistan as well. Afghanistan has never been considered as a major party in this agreement, but a dialogue has been held between the two powers about the situation in Afghanistan and its foreign policy, and both parties to the agreement decide not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The First Article of this Agreement states that: “The British government states that it does not intend to change the political situation in Afghanistan. In addition to exercising its influence in Afghanistan only for the sake of peace, the Government of United Kingdom undertake personally to refrain from threatening Russia in Afghanistan, and not to encourage Afghanistan to do so.(Pamir, 1991)

The Russian government also states that it recognizes Afghanistan as an area outside its sphere of influence, and it is committed to establishing political relations with Afghanistan through the British monarchy. Russian Government also pledges not to send any representatives or agents to Afghanistan."

The Government of United Kingdom, which had reached an agreement with the late Amir Abdul Rahman on signing of the Kabul Treaty in 21st March 1905, declares that it respects all promises and commitments relating to this Treaty and has no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The British government pledges not to annex or occupy part of Afghanistan in violation of the agreement, and not to interfere the internal affairs of this country, if the Afghan Amir accomplishes his obligations to the Government of United Kingdom as set forth in the Agreement.

It being revealed with a closer look at these two articles that the British government has made non-interference in Afghanistan a restricted condition that if the Amir of Afghanistan does not violate the provisions of the 1905 Convention, they will not interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. It means that Afghanistan cannot voluntarily establish relations with the outside world or pursue an independent foreign policy. (Zamani, 2012)

9. Conclusion

Despite the favourable anti-British atmosphere inside Afghanistan and some parts of Indian subcontinent, and the desire of foreign powers such as the Ottoman Empire and the German government to establish extensive relations with Afghanistan on the eve of World War I; Habibullah Khan retreated against the demands of the people and outside world, and pursued the isolation policy of his father and refused to intervene in this war in favour the Central Powers. The position of Afghanistan during the reign of Habibullah Khan was not more than a protected country. So considering the principle that the foreign policy of weak countries is always subject to the structure of the international system, we reach to such conclusion that Afghanistan was an extremely weak and powerless country in the time of Habibullah Khan that did not even have the right to establish or cut ties with neighbours and foreign countries. So we conclude that alike Abdul Rahman’s reign, in the time of Habibullah Khan Afghanistan's foreign policy was a policy of isolation and was absolutely managed and controlled by the British. That is why Afghanistan could not enter to war. The policy of neutrality was both a product of the will of Afghan king and a sign of British pressure and influence on the government of Habibullah Khan.

References